HUGO MEIER-THUR – SYNESTHESIA AND LIFE IN BLACK AND WHITE

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Abstract. The artist and designer Hugo Meier-Thur (*1881) has published a graphic work inspired by the synesthetic perception of music and sounds. From 1910 until his violent death in 1943 he taught graphics and typography at Kunstgewerbeschule Hamburg (the Hansische Hochschule für Bildende Künste). In 1927, he displayed a variety of graphic works at the first congress of “Farbe-Ton-Forschung” in Hamburg. Most of his synesthetic pictures were realized in black and white. This unorthodox style of synesthetic imagination is thus focused on visual forms. A detailed case-study on Meier-Thur’s perception and synesthetic art perception was published in 1927.

Keywords: Synesthesia, Graphic Art, Musical Graphics, Art History.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1920s, numerous approaches to the development of modern art are evident in Germany. Virtually in parallel, this era also showed ambitions to understand the relation of perceptual experience and artistic work. Especially phenomena of synesthesia raised high attention. Several congresses on color-tone research (“Farbe-Ton-Forschung”) brought together a rich variety of painters, graphic artists, musicians and scientists. Those halcyon years came to a brutal end with the beginning of the National Socialist dictatorship. It caused the severe persecution of modern artists and their works. Furthermore, all activities on synesthesia research and music-painting faced social resentments, and thus were turned down. Finally, the War caused the destruction of numerous artworks. Many artists lost their lives. After the War, artists, works and efforts on synesthesia research were mostly forgotten.

Hugo Meier-Thur was one of the very few artists intensely involved in the production of modern art as well as music-painting. Most of his graphic works and paintings have been destroyed, and he was killed by the Nazi regime for political reasons. By means of the rare material available today, this paper shall bring his early activities back to mind.

Today, especially Meier-Thur’s music paintings are still ignored. Some sources provide detailed information about his life and his graphical work (BRUHNS, 2001; GED, 2018; STOL, 2018). None of these sources, however, mention his works presented in the context of color-tone research, and none of his music paintings is currently included in lists of his artwork.

The first step to approach Meier-Thur’s work is to review his music-painting in relation to the respective music. As a second step, a review of the comprehensive case study provided by Georg Anschütz in 1927 will provide more insight into the artist’s subjective experience.

Within this contribution, it is not intended to systematically prove the statements of the early case study with recent findings on synesthesia. The discussion, however, shall address the question on the relation between subjective sensation as basic material or art, and its specific creative elaboration.

2. BIOGRAPHY

Hugo Meier-Thur was born on October 26, 1881 in Wuppertal-Elberfeld, named Hugo Arthur Meier.¹ Later on, at the beginning of his career as an artist, he changed his name to Hugo Meier-Thur, by extracting the second syllable of “Arthur”.

After an apprenticeship as a precision mechanic in Hamburg until 1899, Meier-Thur was employed at the Leitz company in Wetzlar. He had been engaged in painting and drawing since he was 20 years old. In 1908 he started his studies of drawing and applied arts at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Hamburg². He was

taught by Carl Otto Czeschka and Paul Helms. Since 1910, he himself was employed at this institution as a teacher of typography and calligraphy (Schriftzeichen), perspective, drawing, nature studies and watercolor painting (BRUHNS, 2001). In the years between 1915-18, he was forced to take part in the First World War, in which he was wounded. He started to work on abstract music-painting in 1920 or 1921. In 1927, Meier-Thur was appointed to a professorship. After the political changes in Germany in the beginning of the 1930s with the takeover of the National Socialist tyranny, his art was defamed as being degenerate (entarted), like all kinds of conceptional, expressionistic and surrealistic artworks during that time. Especially, this accusation concerned his book Welt-Wehe (MEIER-THUR, 1922). Like other professors, he was suspended from teaching (HFBK, 2018).

All of his artwork was destroyed in his studio during the allied air raid on Hamburg on July 28, 1943, which caused a devastating fire storm. Meier-Thur was arrested on August 1, 1943 by the secret police, the Gestapo. As a political prisoner, he was killed in the concentration camp Fuhlsbüttel on December 5, 1943. The reasons for his political persecution are not really clear. His artwork had been outlawed by the national socialist regime. Therefore, he was not allowed to publish manuscripts or to exhibit his artwork. His friend Walter Funder mentioned that even then he was not willing to adapt his thinking and work to the ruling ideology (DIERKS, 1987, p. 31). Whereas many of his colleges represented either the conservative “Wiener Schule” or the politically preferred racial art (“Völkische Kunst”), he continued to stand in for modernism (BRUHNS, 2001, p. 286).

3. ARTISTIC WORK/GRAPHIC DESIGN

Hugo Meier-Thur was an artist who focused on graphic art, painting and typography. A portrait of him is shown in Fig. 1.

Various printed works include his illustrations, images and text. Especially various hand-crafted prints show his skills in designing and handling original techniques; e.g. “Blockbücher/Zierbücher” produced by the “Werkstatt Lerchenfeld” workshop (MEIER-THUR, 1922, 1926, 1928).

His publications can be categorized as follows:

1. Books illustrated by the artist (e.g. MEIER-THUR, 1922, 1926; KLOPSTOCK, 1927)
2. Books with published graphical works (e.g. MEIER-THUR, 1928)
3. Publications regarding art/design theory (e.g. MEIER-THUR, 1930, 1937)

Meier-Thur did not classify his own work regarding style by himself. He notes that his style may be classified as expressionistic by outside observers (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, p.1 20). Indeed, printing techniques like woodcut have intensely been utilized by various expressionistic artists, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and many others. Therefore, besides colorful paintings, black and white prints with rugged forms and hard contrasts are a typical element of expressionistic art. With a look at Meier-Thur’s music-paintings, the nearly equal distribution of forms all over the image area exhibit some similarity to works of abstract expressionism.

Figure 1. Hugo Meier Thur. Photo by J. Grubenbecher (HEISIG, ed., 1994).

Furthermore, his objective images often show a tendency towards surrealism. Those drawings remind of Alfred Kubin. Various works published in Spuk und Spiel show an impressive kind of fantastic realism (MEIER-THUR, 1928).

During his interview with Georg Anschütz in the context of the case study, Meier-Thur indicates that the impressionistic style is least dispositional to him (“Der sogen. ‘impressionistische Stil’ liegt M. am wenigsten”, ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, p.120). A considerable part of Meier-Thur's graphic work is inspired by a synesthetic perception of music and sounds.

3 According to (BRUHNS, 2001), it is not clear what is meant by “Wiener Schule”: presumably the Vienna Secession with its design institution “Wiener Werkstätten”
An excerpt of an unpublished essay on visual arts is shown in Fig. 2. Using the example of a few simple forms, Meier-Thur discusses the influence of the spatial arrangement of forms on the overall aesthetic appearance. He emphasizes the main importance of the subjective view. The artist needs to make a strictly individual decision on the favorable design. This statement has some relevance for Meier-Thur’s approach on arranging synesthetic elements on the canvas. The artistic challenge of balancing non-objective forms within a complex configuration seems to overrule the pure reproduction of the synesthetic experience in all of his music paintings.

He focussed his educational work on calligraphic typography. In his opinion writing is one of those cultural goods which are qualified to be assessed from an artistic point of view (MEIER-THUR, 1930, p. 3). Artistic handwriting is often practiced by means of primitive tools not only on paper, but on wood, stone, metal, parchment or clay. He points out that this is essential, because the hand needs to feel the nature of the material through the tool. This is the only way to learn to really master the material. Thus, the tool determines the art’s style in close conjunction with fine motoric abilities, spirit and conscious intention (will). This statement is of some importance regarding his music paintings (see below), because it implies that style is not only driven by the nature of phenomena to be depicted; furthermore, it is a result of the sensory experience of the technical process.

Moreover, he states that one has to distinguish between simple handwriting (Handschrift), as used in daily life, and calligraphic writing (Kunstschrift). The latter is intended to show beauty, characteristic and clarity. The main features are rhythm and regularity; harmony of head and hand is the main objective. Therefore, manual writing is always more valuable than use of machines, in case it is applied as a tool of the spirit (MEIER-THUR, 1930, p. 4). Accordingly, Meier-Thur’s educational work follows his basic assumption that calligraphic writing is the origin of studies on all kinds of arts (HÖLSCHER, 1937).

In 1927, Meier-Thur attended the first congress of color-tone research (“Farbe-Ton-Forschung”) in Hamburg. This congress included a large exhibition of paintings and sculptures of synesthetic experience and musical graphics with some 2000 exhibits (GRUNDNER, 1930, p. 26). Meier-Thur contributed to this exhibition with a variety of graphic works. Only a small number of works, however, survived the War as part of two publications (see next chapter). Even today, the early congresses on color-tone research are of specific interest when considering the fact that they are rather similar to current conferences on synesthesia and the arts. These events are characterized by a unique combination of science, fine arts and music.

His theoretical considerations, however, included topics related to the perception of colors. In 1930 he gave a presentation on color and its perception in the context of a series of lectures to Anschütz’s research circle “Psychologisch-ästhetischer Forschungsgesellschaft” in Hamburg (“Die Farbe”, GRUNDNER, 1930, pp. 41-42). On that occasion, he outlined the subjective aspects of color. From his point of view, light and color are expressions of the spirit, which in space is perceivable by the senses (“Licht und Farbe selbst aber sind ihrerseits Ausdrucksformen des Geistes, der im Raume den Sinnen sich wahrnehmbar macht”).

4. PAINTING MUSIC 1920 – 21

Meier-Thur crafted an impressive series of synesthetic images and musical graphics during the 1920s. The original graphics are lost, but those which are available as part of publications are preserved and worthy of a detailed analysis. Anschütz published a series of 13 graphics (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, plate VI-XIII) and further 6 images (ANSCHÜTZ, 1928, plate II-IV & VII-IX). All pictures of the first publication have been redrawn for print, because it was not possible to directly use photographs (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927). Meier-Thur’s unorthodox black-and-white style of synesthetic painting is greatly interesting, because it provokes an analysis which is focussed on visual forms.
Figure 3. Hugo Meier-Thur: Robert Schumann, Träumerei, Kinderszenen (Reverie, Scenes from Childhood) op. 15 no.7. (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, plate VII). References to musical instruments added by the author according to Meier-Thurs’s descriptions (p. 138).
All of his music paintings are characterized by a strict non-objective style. Pictures show synesthetic imagination (synoptische Erscheinungen), recalled from memory. Single forms were seen spontaneously and unintentionally. The distribution of forms across the image space (Bildraum), however, and the grouping of forms follows aesthetical needs (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, p. 137). Various images show simultaneous impressions of a variety of forms stimulated at different times in the course of the auditory stream. Single forms remain in the memory and are present during listening. Forms are thus not arranged like a ribbon or frieze (p. 138). An example is depicted in Fig. 3, regarding Träumerei, a piano piece from Kinderszenen (Reverie, Scenes from Childhood), op. 15 no. 7, by Robert Schumann.

Further pictures were prepared during the case study. Those images were intended to exclusively include visual phenomena without artistic additions, and if possible, separated into single elements.

5. CASE STUDY 1927

Hugo Meier-Thur’s perception of sound has been recorded with great detail, based on his own descriptions. The anthology related to the first congress of “Farbe-Ton-Forschung” includes 23 pages of documentation in German (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, pp. 118-140).4 This extent of a detailed case study was rather exceptional during the time of publication. The paper also includes an analysis of test subjects Max Gehlsen and Heinrich Hein. These persons were selected out of some 150 subjects who had responded to a journal survey, which was first issued in 1925 (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927b, p. 19). In 1927, Anschütz reports that until then around 200 true cases of color hearing (Farbenhören = auditory-visual synesthesia) had been found (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927c). The page numbers noted in this chapter refer to (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927).

Georg Anschütz classified synesthetic phenomena like those discussed herein as Komplexe Synopsie, referring to the occurrence of complex images caused by complex pieces of music. On the contrary, the occurrence of single visual features like colors of tones without the perception of complex forms was classified as analytical in conjunction with phenomena across the senses (Analytische Synopsie, ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, pp. 68-71).

Some of Anschütz’s essential notes on Meier-Thur’s perception and his complex characteristic of synesthesia are summarized below.

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4 Anschütz refers to Hugo Meier-Thur as “Hugo Meier”

5.1 Perception and preferences in general

Meier-Thur reports that he is highly impressed when listening to music. Sometimes music gives its strongest impression when remembered, whereas phantasy adds content. In general, even his experience of visual art is much more intense in memory, compared to direct vision. In this case, an unintentional addition of subjective elements occurs (p. 120). He most likes symphonies and organ music (he played harmonium himself: BRUHNS, 2001, p. 287). He prefers the music of the classical and romantic repertoire like Beethoven, Chopin and Schubert. He is not able to identify absolute pitch. Emotions influence his perception. The mood of music is most important for recognition and the remembering of music. Although his memory of visual impressions is stronger than for music sensations, auditory events have a stronger impact on emotions. He often experiences hypnagogic hallucinations, with or without colors. Meier-Thur is interested in science, with a focus on the humanities, especially on philosophy.

5.2 Synesthetic perception

He first perceived synesthetic images at the age of 37 years, when hearing a canon roar during the First World War. His synesthetic phenomena include music, letters and sounds, but not numbers, days of the week etc. (p. 123). Synesthetic images (synoptische Erscheinungen) caused by auditory stimuli are usually perceived with the eyes closed. Those visual synesthetic phenomena are stronger during listening than from memory or phantasy. Noise generates the most impressive visual phenomena if the sounds are frightening (p. 125).

Musical tones provide specific basic forms: dotted (punktierte) tones (e.g. bell, piano, harp) are distinguished from linear tones (e.g. violin, flute, trumpet), as shown in Fig. 4 (p. 129).

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Figure 4. Hugo Meier-Thur: Violin sequence and single piano tones (ANSCHÜTZ, 1927, plate X, 2).
**Figure 5.** Hugo Meier-Thur: Charles Gounod, Faust-Waltz. Anschütz 1927, plate VI. References to musical instruments added by the author according to Meier-Thur’s descriptions (p. 138).
Single tones of a musical scale do not show a specific, constant color. Perceived colors, however, are influenced by pitch: Low pitch tones cause darker colors, high tones evoke brighter ones (p. 131). In contrary to the less definite synesthetic colors, single tones cause distinct forms, which depend on timbre, duration, loudness, dynamic, and others tone features.

Low pitch tones are heavier and larger (schwerer und formal größer), but do not always occur in the lower part of the field of vision. High pitch tones are smaller and slimmer. They cause upward forms (pp. 131-132).

Reproduced musical stimuli usually cause reproduced synesthetic phenomena. Odour can amplify this synesthetic experience. As an example, frankincense strengthens phenomena caused by the sound of an organ.

Each letter of the alphabet causes a specific synesthetic form, which is modified by the context (words) and pronunciation (idiom/dialect, p. 124).

Synesthetic images have a fixed location. They remain at their initial location, even if the eyes or head move. (p. 121).

Aesthetic features of colors correspond to the features of the instrument’s sound. They can be beautiful, transparent, bright, soft, filmy (duftig) or like a whiff (hauchartig, p. 128). Sometimes fixed colors are connected to personalities.

Phenomena are more evident without mental focus and without thinking. For Meier-Thur it is thus more difficult to achieve synesthetic phenomena during intentional experiments. Emotions, like joy about music, support occurrence of phenomena (p. 125). Visual perception while listening to music, however, can disturb the synesthetic images.

Some elements are two-dimensional, but most show downright spatiality. Sometimes the inner view includes an infinite space. Neither geometric nor atmospheric perspective exists for the perceived phenomena. Visual elements can be transparent (p. 126). Synesthetic images can surround the listener, but can be part of the body, too (p. 127). Sometimes sounds are like body sensations, almost like something material (p. 136).

The form of visual synesthetic phenomena is perceived to be more important than color. Especially noise causes more forms but less colors than music (p. 135). Usually, the background shows “clear darkness”. In this case, phenomena are seen as light forms (Fig. 5). Sometimes, however, dark forms occur on dull grey or bright backgrounds. Colors are mostly transparent, like colored liquids. Fortissimo causes larger and more colorful images than pianissimo (p. 134).

Forms often show movement. It is usually evident from left to right, sometimes from bottom to top or vice versa. Diagonal movement also occurs.

5.3 Meier-Thur’s notes on his drawings of synesthetic phenomena

According to Meier-Thur’s descriptions, synesthetic images and those perceived visually cause different emotions. Music can be beautiful in the brightest colors, whereas paintings in bright colors can appear to be ugly, without a contrast in darkness (p. 133).

Most of his synesthetic phenomena include distinct forms. He notes that those forms can only be depicted by means of a graphic technique which enables the reproduction of subtle details. Although he frequently experiences colored synesthetic images, phenomena often only include black, white and grey (p. 128).

Meier-Thur reports that his synesthetic phenomena consist of “new” elements which are unknown from the exterior world. The perceived images thus exclusively consist of non-objective forms. Phenomena themselves do not include elements of specific artistic styles (p. 126).

Single forms sum up to complex groups, thus assembling the form of a whole piece of music. The rhythm of a piece of music seems to provide the power for substantially changing the form of a sound (p. 132).

Some synesthetic forms are difficult to depict, because Meier-Thur feels that the phenomena are somewhat similar to vision during a dream (p. 134).

5.4 Synesthetic phenomena caused by music – examples (pp. 132-133)

Listening to music evokes specific forms, as shown in Fig. 6 in the case of percussion instruments. Besides a clear perception of various forms, the typical timbre of instruments corresponds to specific colors. Some examples of perceived colors and forms:

- Cello: brown
- Flute: yellow (often bluish), always brilliant
- Trumpet: yellow, sometimes brown, shaped as radiant cones
- French horn: purple
- English horn: brown, green and yellow - high tones: white and yellow ochre
- Spinet: yellowish and greenish
- Grand Piano: carmine, with circular forms, which are open to one side or the bottom, see Fig. 4
- Harp: red, purple and blue, with circular forms
- Violin: ornament lines, as shown in Fig. 4
- Bell: circular forms
Voices:
- Bass: brown, dark, greenish
- Tenor: blue, yellow
- Alto: purple, red
- Soprano: blue, lilac

Furthermore, synesthetic colors are influenced by pitch and timbre. A musical box used in the experiments causes various colors: high pitch tones appear milky, blue-white; mid-tones are golden yellow; low tones are carmine red (p. 131). A piano out of tune appears to be much more colorful than a precisely tuned instrument. Sharp tones cause poisonous (gifiges) green, mixed with grey and yellow. In this case, forms are pointy and jagged.

A graphic regarding his perception of the sound generated by a manually operated coffee mill is shown in (HAVERKAMP, 2009, Fig. 6)

Fig. 7 shows his imagination of the ticking sound (above) and the striking (below) of a wall clock.

5.5 Synesthetic phenomena caused by sounds – examples (pp.123-124)

- Singing blackbird (Drossel): golden yellow, steel-grey/blue and brown.
- Tweeting of a sparrow: narrow form like a pencil of lines from bottom left, up to top right, starting in grey-white, shifting to a cold bright blue color
- Creaking of a chair: small, unpleasant spiky forms
- Continuous hammering: black, longish dots
- Hammering of a blacksmith: deep blue-red
- Hammer blow on anvil: two semicircles, which quickly conjoin with each other
- Saw applied to marble: bright shimmer, spiky grey-brown needles above a black-brown darkness, hissing noise seen as sideward stripes
- Humming of a car: brown clouds
- Hooting of a vehicle horn: slim, wedge-shaped forms from left to right with greenish yellow-black color, increased brightness at the tip. The origin of these forms appears to be upended (aufgestülpt).

Within Meier-Thur’s perception, the locations of forms sometimes include a correspondance of pitch to height. The typical conjunction of pitch to brightness is also evident, but does not systematically contribute to the complex visual sensations. A fixed location of visual synesthetic phenomena in case of eye or head movement may indicate a projector type of synesthetic vision (SIMNER, HUBBARD, 2013, pp. 442-452).

Anschütz himself rated the results of the experiments performed for the case study to be fragmentary and vague. He thus states that the results may be of little value for systematic analysis (p. 136). This can presumably be explained by the fact that Meier-Thur needed to intensely become acquainted with each piece of music, before clear and reproducible synesthetic phenomena occurred (p. 137). Obviously, time was too limited in the experimental situation.

Unfortunately, the technique used by Meier-Thur for making the synesthetic graphics has not been documented. In general, he used various methods like pen drawing, lino cut, woodcut, or lithographic print for his artistic work. A precise knowledge of the
methods he applied for music- and sound-painting would help to understand the influence of the materials and tools on his depictions of synesthetic phenomena. As stated above, he insisted that the practical method used essentially contributes to the style of (his) artwork.

6. COMMEMORATION

Hugo Meier-Thur is mentioned in some documents listing the victims of the National Socialist regime. (e.g. DIERKS, 1987) In public, however, most of those persons have been forgotten.

An arts project initiated by Gunter Demnig tends to improve this situation and to commemorate the victims. For that reason, commemorative brass plaques have been integrated into the pavement in front of the place where Meier-Thur’s house stood (Wagnerstrasse 60, old number 72; Hamburg-Barmbek-Süd) and at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg (Lerchenfeld 2). Both plaques show Meier-Thur’s name, year of birth, location of imprisonment and date of death.

These commemorative stones with a covering bronze plate are part of Demnig’s art project “Stolpersteine”. This is meant to install stumbling stones which are intended to virtually hinder passengers from quickly passing by. Instead, people are invited to remember the victims of National Socialism. From 1995 until now, “Stolpersteine” can be found at 610 places in Germany as well as in Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Norway and Ukraine (STOL, 2018b).

It can thus be concluded that some important projects of commemoration have been initiated. In the case of Hugo Meier-Thur and numerous others, however, much more effort is needed to bring those persons back to public memory and to adequately recognize their lifework. Furthermore, Meier-Thur’s musical graphics need to find a definite position in the history of modern arts.

7. CONCLUSION

Hugo Meier-Thur was one of the few modern artists whose synesthetic perception was documented during the 1920s. His artistic work focussed on drawing and printed graphics in black and white. His music-paintings are also prepared in black and white. Thus, his individual synesthetic experience is exclusively expressed via form but not by means of color. This impressive example illustrates how synesthetic imagination caused by listening to sounds and music can include a variety of specific forms. Those non-objective forms can group to highly complex spatial arrangements, which make it difficult to find simple correlations to the parameters of the causative auditory stimuli. Therefore, in this paper it is not intended to extensively compare and align the findings of an earlier case study with current definitions and classifications of synesthetic phenomena (as defined in e.g. SIMNER, HUBBARD, 2013). In the case of Meier-Thur’s detailed descriptions of his own synesthesia, backed-up with numerous graphic depictions, even Anschütz himself had some doubt to provide a simple and consistent analysis. He noted that Meier-Thur’s descriptions indicate that “a lot” of sensations are present (allerlei vorhanden), but in a somewhat unclear manner, until he could be able to completely sense a piece of music in all its details (p. 136). Furthermore, the aesthetic processing of basic sensations does not really make a pure scientific clarification easier. But it brings into mind that synesthetic phenomena can show a remarkable complexity, a fact that is more impressing communicated by means of graphics and paintings than by explanatory text. Synesthesia can be much more than hearing color and number forms. Thus, it is a major merit of Hugo Meier-Thur, that he demonstrates this fact in a highly impressive way. There is some hope that further studies will provide broader insight specifically into the complexity of synesthetic phenomena.

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